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ABSTRACT

In popular culture, the word "research" is a term of reverence--in academe it is virtually a mantra. Research in any field may wish to seem detached and objective, but it is always political, whether it involves launching rockets or teaching writing, and it depends on a crisis mentality to support it. In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, that crisis mentality led to renewed government support for education in science and math, and it led those in English to lay claim to similar support. The academic politics in mid-century led English teachers to feel great inferiority compared to scientists. This sense of inferiority led to an imitation of the trappings of science. Unfortunately, this adoption of scientific and social scientific research methods has come at a time when even the disciplines which first sponsored such methods have begun to question their validity. Yet those in the English profession can not completely abandon the modes of scientific inquiry that they have come to call research. Instead, they must recognize the narrow limits of research, and broaden the concept of research to include such alternatives as the rhetorical mode of inquiry. Composing is a science, an art, an invention, and a relationship. Modes of inquiry must grow from motives that are deeply personal, composed in conversation with one another. (MM)

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RESEARCH AND THE WRITING TEACHER:

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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I cannot hear the word "research" without thinking of an old movie called *The Mad Doctor of Market Street*. It opens with the dark, ominous view of a sign that reads: "Robert Benson, Doctor of Research." Soon after we see the said Dr. Benson trying to convince an anxious research subject to participate in a questionable experiment. You can guess the subject's fate. "Doctor of Research"--an absurdly vague title for any profession, but this simple Hollywood exaggeration can remind us of how blindly we tend to respect the word *research*. In popular culture, it is a term of reverence, and in academe, especially at large universities, it is virtually a mantra.

However, despite its overwhelming authority, I hold the term suspect, at least as it is commonly used. Perhaps that's a matter of upbringing. I was raised in a "scientific" or "technological" family--my father is an industrial chemist, and my brother a mechanical engineer. Though they respect scientific inquiry, they are also aware of its limits. Years of dinnertime narratives recounting the foibles and follies of what, to the public, were supposed to be scientific endeavors predisposed me to doubt the reliability of research claims. In their own casual way, my family members taught me that research and rhetoric are inescapably intertwined.

But I didn't follow in the "family trade." Captivated instead by books and wordplay, I majored in English. As an undergraduate, I developed a strong interest in writing, and after completing a teaching assistantship during a Master's program, I also developed an interest in teaching. These interests led me to teach English in high school and also as an adjunct university instructor. I thought about completing a doctorate, but it never occurred to me that I might someday wish to become a "researcher." I lived in and moved through the medium that scientists are kind enough to call "natural language." I felt no need enter the strange realms of statistics and experimental measurement.

Gradually, however, I began to sense my personal limits, and I found that I just didn't know enough about teaching writing. In corridor conversations at school, or with friends who were studying in English graduate programs, I heard references to much that I did not yet understand--new approaches to composition "pedagogy," a term that was itself new to me. Moreover, I heard of supposedly authoritative research that provided a foundation for that pedagogy. Feeling both ignorant and guilty--a young and ill-informed member of that class which Stephen North calls "The Practitioners"--I slowly realized just how much I had to learn about teaching writing (North, pp. 21-55). I also realized a powerful desire to do just that--learn how to teach writing. What had started as an avocation had grown into a personal commitment, and so I returned to graduate school in the hope of discovering better ways to teach.

Like many other teachers, I sought initiation into the world of graduate composition studies spurred by a combination of uncertainty, need, guilt, and zeal. In the past, annoying problems with writing pedagogy had led me to blame my students, or to blame the schools, parents, and society at large which had failed to prepare them for me. My renewed graduate study helped me recognize the folly of this habit, but it didn't

necessarily end the chain of blaming the victims. Early on I learned that some English faculty at large research institutions, even some involved in composition research, tended to blame the practicing teachers. At times this blame was in the form of a Jeremiad which depicted most composition teachers as mindless enemies of true learning. At other times the rebuke was gentler, more forgiving—essentially, "go and sin no more." Humbled by my pedagogical failures, and eager for help, I accepted blame, but I also learned to scorn the image of my former self as I saw it in the "unconverted" teacher. I inwardly apologized for years of unscientific training, from my failure to study psycho-linguistics, to my total ignorance of multivariate statistics. But I was one of the fortunate ones, for now I knew that there was research about writing and its pedagogy—research that could strongly support an approach to teaching that would be reliable and verifiable. For a time, the lessons of those family dinner conversations were forgotten.

I do not wish to sound cynical. Let me emphasize that most of the professors and colleagues with whom I studied, along with the works of theory, research, and practice that we read, were nowhere so extreme or absolute in their claims. These people were (and are) genuinely committed to the teaching of writing, and they dedicated themselves to helping composition studies achieve a greater level of professional respect. The model of scientific inquiry seemed the most reliable and authoritative means to that end. So we worked together in an atmosphere of hope, while assuming eventual progress towards new, solid, scientifically supported ground on which to build a more valid and useful writing pedagogy. What was apparently new in this endeavor—new to the profession in the 50s and 60s, and new to me as I returned to graduate school in the 80s—was the application of empirical, clinical, and statistical research methods to what had once been the province of philosophers and rhetoricians. This new science of composition lay behind what were presented as ground-breaking studies—Emig's work with 12th graders, Flower and Hayes' intricate problem-solving research, and hosts of experimental studies whose titles sound vaguely like those found in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Although such discourse was already prominent in the college of education, it had rarely crossed the campus to the English department, the traditional province of composition.

This scientific model for advanced study grew quite attractive to college writing teachers, who were trying to gain academic respect and establish a disciplinary structure for their work. But in adopting it, they inadvertently acquired the same hierarchical paradigm used in many scientific and social scientific disciplines. This paradigm assumes that the theoretical and research communities explore, discover, and proclaim the fundamental principles and axioms of the discipline—to use Stephen North's words, they "make" the knowledge accepted by their field. Meanwhile, the practitioners (just like engineers and technicians) put this knowledge to work in the everyday world. It's a convenient model, and one that tends to be quite comforting. After all, medicine works this way, and physics, and chemistry—it's the way the "hard" sciences make all their progress, isn't it? Those more informed and articulate than I advised me to establish both theoretical and empirical foundations for my teaching. So I read and studied the literature, joined the organizations, and kept up my subscriptions to journals.

As I continued to teach in various T.A. and adjunct positions, I tried to apply what I was studying. I spent long hours analyzing and reflecting on my teaching, and even more time planning classes or responding to students, in both individual conferences and written commentary. And my teaching did seem to grow more flexible, the classes more successful, and the students more satisfied. Yet I was uneasy, for beneath this apparent success was a new and disturbing source of guilt—a secret awareness of something like heresy. I had not yet found a specific theory to espouse, nor could I find a body of research that was entirely consistent within itself, or with my classroom experience.

At first, I excused myself on the basis that I still had so much more to learn. Yet it became increasingly obvious that what had seemed a brave new world of composition research, with its certain progress toward the pure and simple truth, was neither brave nor new, and it was far from purity, simplicity, and perhaps even from truth. In fact, the discipline was increasingly embroiled in conflict. Experimental researchers could not agree with those who did clinical case studies, while formalists were in conflict with ethnographers, and so on. I felt rather humble before these debates, and I also found it hard to take sides—for no one seemed to have a monopoly on the "right answers." In my own mind, I would try to argue for or against various propositions in order to test them out. As a result, I tended to use only what seemed valid to me and discard the rest. But I wondered if I really had the authority to make such judgements about research.

Eventually, I began my own research project—a limited series of case studies, involving three college writers. It was not very ambitious, but at least I was trying to imitate what I had read and discussed in seminars. It was no surprise that my research seemed inconclusive, and of course it led me to respect more deeply the amount of effort and dedication required to perform a long-term, carefully planned study. However, the most compelling result was a growing sense of responsibility to the volunteer student "subjects." I felt genuine pleasure when one or another of them showed signs of growth and success in writing, and I found myself far too involved with these students as individual learners to be an objective observer. A "practitioner" through and through, I couldn't separate research from teaching, and I realized that I probably had no future as an "authentic researcher."

But I was occupied with other endeavors as well—such as a dissertation that led me more into the areas of classical and historical rhetoric. I also changed jobs—rather than teaching, I accepted a year's appointment as a "writer/editor/researcher" for a graduate program in health administration. The change in perspective did me some good, and it brought me into continued, close contact with a great deal of social scientific and public policy literature, as well as with material from the field of medicine. Working as an editor and ghost writer, I began to see a research-oriented field at work from the inside, and what I saw educated me. Months of work went into projects whose ultimate outcome was to argue for further research in order to attract more grant money. That people were dying from the lack of health services was seen as less important than the fact that careers might perish from a lack of publications.

I gradually learned more about the politics of research in academic communities, along with its potential for creating a self-perpetuating hierarchy of unquestioned authority. I grew increasingly angry that research in composition also helped to create such hierarchies, and so further diminish the professional authority of teaching. Those who had originally pursued composition research, to gain a measure of respect both for writing teachers and their students, had ultimately given way to others who viewed the practicing teacher as inherently inferior. These researchers seemed to suggest the writing teacher should have little or no voice in the emerging field of composition studies. The making of knowledge was considered the province of "those who know," not "those who teach."

Of course this pattern is ideally suited to the existing political structure of large universities, which consistently provide incentives to value research over teaching. In addition, because such institutions are so powerful, their model is imitated by smaller universities and colleges hoping to improve their image. Ultimately, a commitment to teaching composition is still viewed as the lowest of professional priorities. So as I saw the focus of research shift from the working classroom to the researcher's own *c.v.*, I once more recalled those dinner conversations with my father. Speaking of many research

efforts in the industrial setting, he had put it quite simply—"a lot of it is just people trying to justify their existence or do empire building." I looked around me at the various empires that were growing in my own field--and the emperors who maintained them, and the clothes they wore.

However, I managed to overcome some of my initial anger, recognizing that even so-called "truth seekers" have mixed motives, and that no single discipline can be held accountable for the political structure of large universities. I grew less judgemental of the limits and weaknesses of composition research, but in the process I grew less apologetic for my own limits. My research project had focused on how students in advanced writing courses develop a sense of personal identity and authority as writers. In that study I now recognize a paradigm for my own education--a growth of similar identity and authority as a writing teacher.

My professional development is similar to that of many in our field, and in a sense our individual histories reflect that of our discipline. Several recent books and articles discuss the growth of composition studies and its use (or abuse) of various methods of inquiry and research (especially Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, mentioned above). Apparently, our mandate for emphasizing a "scientific" approach to studies came in the wake of Sputnik. The Russians had sent up the first satellite, while our attempt to follow had blown up on the launch pad. Once more (as we continue to do) we declared ourselves a nation of illiterates, and we pledged to catch up with education, much in the same way we had pledged to mobilize troops and produce planes for World War II, just as our current national administration pledges to support education so that "America can compete."

Research in any field may wish to seem detached and objective, but it is always political, and whether it involves sending up rockets or teaching writing, it depends heavily on a crisis mentality to support it. That crisis mentality led, in the late 50s and early 60s, to renewed government support for education in science and math, and it led those in English to lay claim to similar support. English educators argued that, if Johnny and Jane can't read, they even won't find their way to the launch pad, much less send up the rocket. Somewhere in the psyche of our profession, we embraced the notion of research as if we were engaged in a verbal "Manhattan Project," convinced that with enough resources, effort, and scientific discipline, we would eventually unlock a secret of overwhelming power, and then we would seem as awesome as nuclear physicists.

I think our profession has grown so attached to the images and icons of "scientific research" because we secretly coveted that kind of power, whether or not we understood its implications. The academic politics in mid-century led us to feel great inferiority. Our foundation grants were minimal compared to those of the physicist or brain surgeon. Our sense of inferiority led us to imitate and borrow the impressive trappings of science. When Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer issued their report in 1963, there was already a considerable body of composition research, albeit of doubtful value. Essentially, their report--*Research in Written Composition*--concluded that, if composition claimed to be a research-based discipline, and attempted to sound scientific, then it would have to pursue its work honestly, with the same kind of rigor and method apparently exercised by natural and social sciences. This report did not so much set the agenda for composition studies as it argued that the de facto agenda (a scientific profession) must do more than play at the edges of science. Composition research had to take itself seriously.

Over a quarter of a century later, we continue to evaluate that research agenda and its place in the life of our profession. We continue to ask: "What is research?" "Who is to do it?" and "How is it to be done?" Perhaps we can also begin to ask other questions. Whom does it serve? What is its purpose? I raise these questions now, not

to suggest that several decades of work have left us with nothing. In many cases, our seriousness about the work has led to a profound growth in the lives of individual teachers and in the life of the profession of teaching writing. But this is a growth of attitude and commitment, an evolution of our sense of confidence and authority. Having achieved it, perhaps we can take new risks and suggest new models for our work. But first we must confront some of our illusions.

Like the members of some cargo cult, we have constructed a piecemeal methodology from the artifacts of other disciplines. Unfortunately, our adoption of scientific and social scientific research methods has come at a time when even the disciplines which first sponsored such methods have begun to question their validity. In many fields—from mathematics and economics to psychology and medicine—contemporary researchers have begun to examine the rhetoric inherent in their own methods of inquiry. A recent collection of essays, *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, provides just one example of the intensified work with this "rhetoric of inquiry," exploring the ways in which language and rhetoric establish the authority of "scientific truth." In another context, as N. Katherine Hayles suggests in *The Cosmic Web*, we can see that a whole generation of theoretical physicists has grown up questioning the kind of "hard" certainty traditionally associated with the scientific method. Ironically, the outmoded conception of hard science is the very one we have fostered in composition research. We would be wise to heed the caution of physicist Neils Bohr, who often reminded his colleagues that "we are suspended in language" (Hayles, p. 52).

In 1963 Braddock and his colleagues concluded that our profession was doing a bad imitation of scientific inquiry. Looking at the scope and breadth of what has been done since, we can see tremendous effort and commitment to become more rigorously faithful to that scientific model. However, the results have often been limited and conflicting. Now it is becoming increasingly apparent that the sciences we envied were never as hard or certain as they had seemed. We have tended to follow a chimerical image of scientific certainty, while ignoring our roots in rhetoric and humanistic discourse. Having borrowed so much, for so long, we seem to have forgotten how to conceive of and create our own paradigms.

Where does that leave us? How are we to answer our questions? I do not pretend to have discovered some magic bullet for our salvation or recovery. But I believe that we can still reclaim a more valid sense of identity for our discipline, without sacrificing our professionalism or our authority. Having acknowledged my personal journey as reflective of our discipline's current history, I can describe what has become my own mode of inquiry—one for which I find significant precedent, and which may support a number of alternative roles for the researcher. I refer to it as "the rhetorical mode of inquiry" because it draws on an ancient tradition of combining rhetorical practice with inquiry into questions of nature and human experience. Moreover, it parallels the current, broad-based effort to examine the rhetoric inherent in all modes of inquiry. Ultimately, it is based on the assumption that human knowledge is both a rhetorical and a social construction.

I begin by going back to those roots, those dinner conversations—to dialogue. To be alive in the medium of language, to be at play in an environment of words—that is what brought me into this enterprise to begin with—not in isolation, but in a constant interchange with others. I also go back to the heart of my commitment, to teaching. I am a practitioner, and I make no apologies for that fact. Describing practitioners, Stephen North says:

[they] work at Composition . . . in a variety of settings: classrooms at all levels, some devoted exclusively to writing, some not; in writing labs and centers; as hired graders; as consultants in both

academic and non-academic situations, and so on. . . . In the process they draw on, and contribute to, a body of knowledge that I have come to call *lore*: the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught (North, p. 22).

I find this description strikingly similar to how George Kennedy, a historian of classical rhetoric, describes the Renaissance Italian humanists:

the humanists usually earned their living either by teaching rhetoric or some aspect of classical studies or by working as a chancellor or public secretary to a prince, a pope, or a commune. In this capacity, they put to practical use their knowledge of rhetoric (Kennedy, p. 196).

Both descriptions emphasize the multiple roles brought about by the universal need for an understanding and mastery of rhetorical skill. This further emphasizes the social context for work in composing, both now and in the Renaissance.

The Renaissance humanists set an agenda that made rhetoric into its own mode of inquiry, in many respects the equal of philosophy. This was based on a tradition that had started with Isocrates in Greece, and had been continued by Cicero and Quintilian in Rome. Rhetoric was not merely a means of persuasion, but a way of creating—literally *inventing*—knowledge. Karen Burke LeFevre renews this agenda when she argues for rhetorical invention as a mode of inquiry in *Invention as a Social Act*. LeFevre claims that rhetorical inquiry:

emphasizes the role of the rhetor or the investigator in constructing an argument or hypothesis. This is a dynamic view of invention as the creation of something new—new for the individuals or groups who have not previously thought of it, or new in that it has not previously been conceived by anyone at all (LeFevre, p. 7).

Her notion of creating knowledge through a rhetorical and social context has great richness, especially because it recalls the tradition of rhetorical inquiry that has persisted, in one way or another, for millennia.

I do not ask that we completely abandon the modes of scientific inquiry that we have come to call research. However, we must recognize their rather narrow limits, and we must broaden the concept of research to include such alternatives as the rhetorical mode of inquiry. I believe in the potential of the *rhetor as researcher*. We are, after all, exploring the process of using language, and our inquiries, just as those of Einstein and Bohr, are indeed suspended in language. Why must we apologize for that? The fact creates unusual difficulties, but it also provides unique opportunities, because our methods and subject matter overlap and intertwine—much as the investigations of quantum physics cannot help but interact with the phenomena they attempt to study.

I choose the role of rhetorician in light of the ancient and Renaissance tradition, in which the rhetor was both teacher and inquirer, practitioner and researcher. This tradition is one in which both teaching and research are unified by their engagement with language in the context of a community. The community aspect of inquiry suggests a further element of the rhetorical mode—*involvement*. Both classical and Renaissance rhetoricians were actively involved in their communities, advocates for change, not mere observers. This may connect with the community context seen in ethnographic research, in which the researcher is involved in the community and with the research subjects. Furthermore, I would argue that the tradition of active rhetorical practice and inquiry parallels the field of "action anthropology" in which the anthropologist is not only an observer but also an advocate for positive change—an obviously rhetorical method of inquiry. Such efforts tend to empower subjects, not abuse them, helping to foster a sense of identity and authority. I would assert that these qualities are an essential part of the

tradition of rhetorical inquiry, for rhetoric is based on relationships and responsibilities within a community.

What I am describing can offer both a mode of inquiry and a variety of roles for the researchers in our profession. I am also suggesting a way to practice the art of teaching composition and the process of disciplinary research at the same time. My methods include research as dialogue, research as interpretive act, and research as heuristic—through which those involved in the research are not subject and observer but co-participants who share authority and learn from each other. From this perspective, the very conversation in the classroom, or in the individual student conference, can serve as a mode of inquiry, a way of making knowledge for the discipline. Likewise, the development of writing courses, the creation of assignments, and the response to student writing can all be part of an ongoing, shared investigation into the nature of composition studies. Teaching itself becomes research, as the teacher and student learn from one another. The dialogue that can evolve through teaching allows both student and teacher to become co-investigators into the process of composing, as well as into the kinds of pedagogy which enrich and encourage that process. This may seem a radical departure from accepted methods and professional practice, but then again substantial breakthroughs are often initiated by radical departures from conventional practice.

I would like to close with a commentary from psychiatrist Robert Coles, who has often argued for a less regimented approach to his own field. In the essay "A Young Psychiatrist Looks at His Profession," he voices his concern about the distortion of purpose and method in psychiatry:

I see Organization Men in psychiatry, with all the problems of deathlike conformity. Independent thinking by the adventurous has declined; psychiatric training has become more formal, more preoccupied with certificates and diplomas, more hierarchical. . . . Today we are obsessed with accreditation, recognition, levels of training, with status as scientists. . . . Once there were the curious and the bold; now there are the carefully well-adjusted and certified. . . . When the heart dies, we slip into wordy and doctrinaire caricatures of life. . . . Our journals, our habits of talk become cluttered with jargon or the trivial. But the real test is whether we best understand by this strange language the worries, fears, or loves of individual people (*The Mind's Fate*, p. 9).

I can see many parallels between Coles' description of psychiatry in 1961 and our own discipline today. Ultimately, for all our words, there are real people, filled with desire and pain, who hope to find in language a way to make contact and achieve a sense of wholeness. If our enterprise has any validity, it is in our engagement with these people, in that troubled and confused dialogue that no single method or discipline can encompass. I have tried to describe the role of researcher as a responsible and responsive person involved with others, in and through that dialogue. Even the rhetorical tradition which I advocate as a model for inquiry can suggest only part of this complex responsibility.

Composition--composing. A science, an art, an invention, a relationship. Finally our modes of inquiry must grow from motives that are deeply personal, from the ways we compose ourselves. Though suspended in language we need not be inactive or silent or totally alone. We may compose ourselves in conversation, together with one another--a community and a communion, almost sacramental--as in so many dinners I recall from long ago at home.

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